

In new year, consider a new workplace culture

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January is traditionally the time of year when we take stock of our lives, but it's also a great time to re-evaluate your company's culture.

Even though the month is half over, it's not too late for you to resolve to improve the workplace environment for your employees. Given the current low unemployment rate that gives your employees the freedom to find alternate employment fairly easily, what sounds like a touchy-feely exercise might in fact be your best investment in employee retention.

Sometimes, culture problems at an organization are so obvious they require you only to recognize and address them. Sportswear giant Under Armour made news in November when The Wall Street Journal reported that company employees had been informed via email that they were no longer allowed to charge visits to strip clubs to their corporate expense accounts.

It's hard to believe that it took until 2018 for a major corporation to realize this practice might be a problem, but the good news is that it did. To no surprise, Under Armour is dealing with a number of other gender-related issues now, but it's made a very small start.

For most companies, the problems are a little less dramatic but still require reflection. As an example, does your annual holiday party skate on the edge of disaster each year, with employees and managers alike making dubious choices?

While you might occasionally worry about liability, you should also be concerned about the long-term workplace impact on employees who are unlikely to file complaints but no longer trust one another or feel comfortable working together.

What happens away from the office can have just as much impact as anything that happens on the clock - and often more so. The new year is a good time to reassess how you handle these parties and where you might consider setting boundaries. Instead of an open bar, perhaps limit drinks to two per person. It might sound like a buzzkill, but it's a good way to prevent serious problems.

Of course, the day-to-day culture of your company also deserves your attention. Making systemic changes can be much more difficult than addressing the obvious problems. The first step is to find out how your employees actually feel about working for you. Simply asking them is the logical approach, but in order to be truly effective, you should consider conducting an employee attitude survey, which assures anonymity. When employees trust that they can speak their minds without retribution, they are much more likely to be forthcoming. So what types of questions should you ask in a survey? I already gave one away: Ask if employees feel they can speak their minds without retribution. Also, ask if they feel their suggestions and concerns are

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taken seriously. Ask if they feel they are trusted to do their jobs, and if they feel they have the opportunity to grow and learn within the company. Ask whether they'd recommend your company as a workplace to their friends - and if not, why not.

All these questions address employee engagement or, as some companies are calling it now, employee experience. You want to figure out what motivates your employees, as well as why they might consider leaving, then take action.

Any employee survey should also include the traditional concerns: How do they feel about their work schedule and the ability - or inability - to work remotely when needed or desired? How do they feel about their employee benefits? Their pay?

Some of these might be areas in which you can't make many changes, but if you acknowledge employees' concerns and explain why you're unable to change those things, it will show you are listening. This can go a long way toward addressing any dissatisfaction. Ignoring concerns raised in an employee survey can be much more harmful to an organization's culture than never asking the questions at all.

Maybe your company culture needs an overhaul. Or maybe it just needs tweaks. Don't wait until the next new year to discover what you could've been doing better throughout 2019.